

10. INSIDE LOOKING OUT

A palmful of dank yellowing leaves held fast to the window and the low sun meant she had to squint to see Mr Greatrix on the path below. She wondered why he hadn't come up the stairs. She slipped into her cardigan and checked her phone in case Randeep had called in the last five minutes and she'd somehow missed it. It had been exactly two weeks since they'd left the flat and she couldn't believe he'd not returned by now to pay the rent.

'Sorry, I left my set at home,' Mr Greatrix said.

Narinder kept hold of the doorknob. 'Are you here for the rent?'

'It is the first day of the month, is it not?'

'So Randeep's not paid you directly?'

He pushed out his lower lip, a display of tender blue veins glazed in saliva. 'And, pray tell, he would be whom when he's at home?'

He sounded much older than he looked. Perhaps he thought he needed to speak like this to be taken seriously.

'My husband,' she said.

'No. I can't say your husband has been in touch.' His voice changed. 'Is this your roundabout way of telling me you don't have this month's rent?'

'I'm sorry.' There was fear in her voice. Surely he couldn't just kick her out? 'I'll speak to my husband.'

He flipped his notebook shut, a notebook Narinder hadn't even noticed until now, and placed his hands behind his back. 'Mrs Kaur, as this is the first time you've defaulted on a payment, please take this as your first and last warning. I'll expect you to make up your arrears in full next month. Otherwise I'll be forced to initiate proceedings. Is that clear?'

'I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding.'

'Be that as it may, you'll receive written confirmation in the post of what we've just agreed.'

He huffed irritably and turned round. There was some sort of lotion on the bony cartilage of his ears, the tips of which were burning red. He'd mentioned something about spending August on holiday. Florida, perhaps. He got into his car, checked his mirrors a little imperiously, as if he knew Narinder was still there, and nosed out.

Back in her room, she tried calling Randeep for perhaps the fourth time that day. Again it went straight to voicemail. She went to the window, as if expecting to see him coming up the road, and then she hurried downstairs and knocked on her neighbour's door. No answer. She tried again.

'Hello? Ji? Are you in, please? It's me from upstairs.'

She waited on the bottom step for a while, then, defeated, returned to her flat. She drew the curtains and lowered herself onto the settee, one hand on the armrest as if she desperately needed its support. She didn't feel like eating. She got nowhere with her puzzle. By seven she was in bed, though the day was still yellow and the light made a perfect unit of itself around the closed curtains of her window.

Later, past midnight, she got up and knocked on his door again. She knew he was in. She'd heard him. She knocked once more, harder, and listened for footsteps. None. Then the door was open and he stood there with his hand high on the frame, forcing his shoulder up by his ear. Behind him, all she could see was the dark strip of a hallway and a wire hanging without its bulb. He was in his orange uniform. He didn't say hello.

'I need to speak to Randeep. He's not answering his phone.'

'Nothing to do with me.'

'But do you know where I can find him?'

'Sorry.' He made to shut the door.

'Just – I was expecting to hear from him. It's very important.'

'Sorry.'

'Well, can you at least give me Avtar's number? I really need to speak to them. It's not like Randeep to not get in touch.'

He shook his head.

'But I thought you all lived together?'

He said nothing.
'Aren't you even worried? You said you were a friend.'
'I said I knew him.' He shut the door.

At the bank she withdrew all her savings. She had enough to cover the rent. Enough to keep him happy for another month, that was all. She tried Randeep again – 'You've reached the voi—' then pushed the phone deep into her bag and walked the half-mile to the job centre.

She'd decided she had no choice. She'd already tried the gurdwara, hoping the women would help her find some paid work, but they'd turned on her, demanding to know why she needed a job all of a sudden. She only prayed that coming into a place like this, a job centre, giving details they'd store away in their computers, wouldn't get her and Randeep into any trouble.

'So you don't have any previous work experience?'

A little green first-aid flag taped to the hard drive read 'Carolyn' and a whole gallery of silver-framed family shots fashioned a fortress around her desk. She was an older lady – fifties, maybe – with large, auburn hair so insistently sprayed it appeared frosted over. The whole effect seemed designed to provide her ears with a pair of giant brackets. Square red-framed spectacles hung on a chain around her neck and she lifted these to the bridge of her nose.

'I'm sure you must have done something?'

'I haven't. Sorry. Only my father and brother worked.'

'How very enlightened.'

Carolyn flipped to the back of the four-page form Narinder had had to complete before being called to the desk.

'I notice you've left the key skills section blank as well.'

'I don't have any.'

Removing her glasses, Carolyn slid the form to one side. 'Now. We're not going to get very far with that attitude, are we? You're twenty-one. Why don't you tell me what you've been doing since your schooling stopped at – ' she glanced across to the form – 'at sixteen.'

'Helping at the gurdwara, mostly. I did that nearly every day.'

‘Volunteering?’

She’d never thought of it like that, as if it was an optional thing. It was just – had been just – part of what it meant to be alive. ‘I was doing my duty.’

‘And what kind of duties are we talking about?’

‘One of my main duties was giving out food. Making sure no one goes hungry.’

‘And did you do that alone or in a group?’

‘In a group.’

‘Excellent. Teamwork. A key transferable skill.’

She was writing all this down in a shorthand Narinder couldn’t decode.

‘What else?’

By the day’s end Carolyn had two interviews arranged. The first was for a cleaning job in a city centre bar, which Narinder said she couldn’t do.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said on the phone.

‘You won’t be serving alcohol. I understand your position on that. This’d be in the mornings when no one else is there.’

‘But it’s under the same roof. I’m not allowed.’

She did agree to attend the second interview, for a role in the womenswear section of a large department store. She’d never been interviewed and was so nervous she didn’t eat. But she thought it had gone well. Two interviewers – a man and a woman – and they’d poured her a glass of water and said they were going to keep things informal by just going through her CV and asking a few competency-based questions. Nothing too taxing, they’d said. She’d left riding a wave of relief and pleasure and as she walked out of the store and into the new world she allowed herself some optimism.

‘Lack of retail experience,’ Carolyn said, when she called to explain why Narinder hadn’t got the role.

‘OK. Thank you.’

‘Don’t sound so despondent. Rome wasn’t built in a day. Christ, it takes my Mal five weeks just to put a shelf up. And I’ve got two

more lined up already. One tomorrow and one for a week on Monday.'

She didn't get those either. Both jobs were in supermarkets and both, again, cited a lack of experience. Narinder thanked Carolyn for letting her know, then switched off her phone and held it in her lap. No one wanted her. She couldn't see a way out. She walked to the doorway of her bedroom and gazed at the photos of her gurus, at the shrine, expecting some sort of solace. She could feel none. For the first time, it just looked like pictures of old men. She forced the thought away and took up her gutka and sat down and started to read, out loud, filling her mind with as many words as she could.

When Carolyn next called, she said she had something that was right up Narinder's street.

'It's at one of the smaller libraries. Part-time assistant. As soon as it came on the board I thought of you.'

'Thank you. That sounds good.'

'Oh dear. I hope you sound less like a miserable Marjorie in the interview.'

Narinder smiled. 'I'm sorry. It sounds great.'

'That's better. Now,' Carolyn said, her voice offering total discretion, 'what were you planning on wearing?'

She didn't take Carolyn's advice, that maybe she should replace her headwear with something less 'statementy' – *A headscarf does the same job, surely?* – and might she also consider trousers on this occasion? She wore a plain sky-blue salwaar kameez with a chunni of a deeper blue, and she topped it all off with a black turban.

The library was a bus ride away, in Dore, on the other side of the city, and abutted a doctor's surgery. She was buzzed through and saw that, in the children's aisle, some sort of mother-and-baby group was in progress.

'Narinder, is it?' a woman said, splitting from the group.

Her long, flowery skirt was elasticated at the waist, and her blouse as white as her hair. A gold brooch, like a fat sun with short rays, was pinned at the neck.

‘Ji. Yes. I’m Narinder. I’m sorry if I’m late.’

‘I’m Jessica,’ the woman said, bringing her hands together in a clap. ‘And I could not be more delighted to meet you.’

They sat in the staff kitchen, drinking tea and discussing things Narinder would later struggle to recall. They’d spoken about India, and Jessica’s time there in the Sixties, and there’d been something about some modifications she was having made to her bungalow. Narinder sat there listening, nodding, waiting for the interview to begin. But then an hour had passed and Jessica said she had to get things ready for the afternoon sessions. So when could Narinder start?

‘Oh!’ Narinder said, her hand leaping to her mouth. ‘You mean – I’ve got the job?’

‘I think you’d be perfect.’

‘Oh, thank you. Thank you so much!’

‘There’s no need to thank me, dear. I need to get the paperwork through, so shall we say two weeks from Monday?’

‘Yes. Yes. That’s – I don’t know what to say. Thank you.’

Jessica squeezed Narinder’s hand and left the room, telling her to take as long as she needed. Tears had come to Narinder’s eyes. It felt as if for the first time in years some joy had entered her life.